



From the Cell to the Classroom

An SEIU Local 1000 research study
on the state of education
in the California prison system

Introduction

The State of Education in California Prisons

• Rehabilitation Saves Taxpayer Money

In the summer of 2005 the State of California reorganized its prison system. For decades California followed “get tough” policies that greatly increased the number of prisoners in the state but failed to prepare them for life on the outside. This resulted in massive overcrowding and one of the highest recidivism rates in the nation. After years of incarcerating more people, building more prisons and spending billions, a new consensus was finally reached. State leaders now realize that inmate rehabilitation makes fiscal sense and will enhance public safety by giving inmates the programming support they need to succeed once they get out of prison.

• Advice from the Front Lines of Rehabilitation

This report is a snapshot of where we are and how far we have to travel on the road to rehabilitation reform. Local 1000 visited two reception centers, two female facilities, and two mainline prisons for men with inmates ranging from Level I to Level IV. Over a two month period we visited Folsom State Prison in Northern California, Valley State Prison for Women, and Central California Women’s Facility in the Central Valley. Further south we visited North Kern State Prison, Kern Valley State Prison and Wasco State Prison. We talked to teachers, vocational instructors, correctional supervising cooks, library workers, and case records analysts to find out what is working in our prisons and what isn’t. Rather than having thousands of workers fill out Yes/No surveys, we conducted focus groups at several prisons in order to discuss in depth what’s going well, what’s not working and possible solutions. Local 1000’s goal is to use these findings as a springboard for a discussion on how to improve rehabilitation programs with limited resources.

Conversations with educators and non-traditional rehabilitation workers reveal just how unique each facility is. While workers told different stories about their successes and challenges working with inmates, we found common themes. There are a handful of issues that focus group participants agree are critical to successful programming. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has made substantial progress on some of these issues, but on others more work needs to be done. The first part of this study will look at some of the successes. The second will focus on some of the challenges that remain. The last part will address some possible responses to those challenges.

Solutions

1. Develop an Alternative Plan to Expand Educational Space

Progress in Reform

• Good Management Matters

We all know that leadership counts. Our visits to facilities across the state convinced us that some progress is being made in the institutional culture of CDCR prisons. Some workers told us that wardens and managers at their facilities were not the big roadblocks to rehabilitation reform that they once were and that there is a real effort to listen and adopt ideas that make sense.

At Kern Valley, vocational instructors and teachers expressed satisfaction with a new principal who has been able to turn around years of mismanagement by listening to his staff and doing a better job of planning and prioritizing scarce resources. Jessica Avery, a Kern Valley vocational instructor for Office Services, has seen a sea change in the ways things are run. “Rod Braly has really been able to get a handle of our education budget. I haven’t had any problems with ordering materials or developing useful curriculum for my inmates because I knew what I needed and he knew how to make sure things were in place on time. I think the new management over education at Kern really recognizes the value of education.”

In some facilities workers told us there was a new openness among wardens to ideas from employees and that rehabilitation was becoming a new priority. At Wasco State Prison Correctional Supervising Cooks (CSCs) have been working to add a classroom and certification component that would provide inmates an opportunity to receive some official recognition for the skills they learn in prison. In the past CDCR offered a vocational program in the culinary arts but it was eliminated in 2003 despite the relative strength of the food services job market in California.¹ This program would not only give inmates an added incentive to work in cooking crews, it also would give them something to put on a resume.

“Inmates need something when they leave prison – a skill,” said Gail Abair, a Correctional Supervising Cook at Wasco State Prison. “The only thing that inmates receive for working on the food services crews is a write up in their 101 work report. That helps when they go before the parole board but what we really need is a certificate program so that inmates have something to show when they apply for a job.”

Our focus group participants said that the warden and management staff at Wasco had expressed support for the idea. After they were given information on how other jurisdictions such as Washington State were using prison vocational culinary service programs to provide inmates with skills, certificates, confidence and jobs when they get out, they saw that it made sense. According to the workers the main roadblock has been funding. With only a little bit of investment the program could get off the ground, contribute to prisoner rehabilitation and reduce recidivism.

• Fewer Lockdowns Means More Time in Class

One of the biggest impediments to inmate education is lockdowns that prevent inmates from going to class. Only three years ago the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) reported that “there were almost 600 lockdowns in state prisons between April and December 2006... Department records show that inmates are absent from education classes about 27 percent of the time due to lockdowns.”² Next to overcrowding, frequent lockdowns have been *the* major obstacle to programming continuity.

Solutions

2. Formally Recognize Inmate Successes in Cook Crews with a Certificate Program

Educators told us that lockdowns have recently decreased somewhat. While our information is anecdotal, all of our focus group participants said that lockdowns had not been a major impediment to rehabilitation programming over the last year. Shawn Toner, a teacher at Kern Valley State Prison reported that “things have gotten better around lockdowns at Kern. Today there are fewer of them than in the past and the duration of lockdowns have decreased.” At both Central California Women’s Facility and Valley State Prison for Women, focus group participants reported fewer lockdowns compared to years past. At Folsom, registered nurse Vicky Depalo told us rehabilitation programs and medical services are proceeding more smoothly because of a drop in the number and duration of lockdowns.

Folsom Prison spokesman Lt. Anthony Gentile notes that the decrease in lockdowns is a result of the rapport that custody staff has been able to build with the inmates and the vigilance with which they carry out their duties. He says correctional officers have created a level of trust among the prisoners and that has led to a decrease in the conflicts that spur general lockdowns. He also credited Folsom’s Investigative Services team for developing relationships with so-called “shot callers” which allows correctional officers to respond more effectively to conflicts.

• Ineffective Education Delivery Model

Under AB900 CDCR was required to “increase full-time participation in inmate academic and vocational education programs by 10 percent from the levels of participation on April 1, 2007” by December 2008.³ At a majority of the facilities we visited our focus group participants reported that the number of inmates receiving either academic or vocational instruction has increased over the last two years. However, part of the increase is due to the expansion of an instructional model that has problems.

Our participants pointed out that much of the increase in educational programming has been connected to the expansion of the “Alternative Education Delivery Model” (AEDM). This model includes a Distance Learning Program and an independent study component that replaces direct teacher instruction with pre-packaged educational modules delivered to each inmate by hand. In 2007 approximately 6000 inmate-students were enrolled in these types of educational programs — about an 18 percent increase from 2005.⁴ One criticism of this approach is that it robs inmate students of the opportunity to be active participants in their own learning process and relegated teachers to the role of classroom monitors.⁵ As the number of inmates receiving boiler plate instruction increases, the quality of instruction declines.

“There has been an increase in the number of inmates receiving some educational instruction,” said Cindy Greer, an Adult Basic Education teacher at Valley State Prison for Women. “But the shift in academic programming has become all about the numbers and not about quality. I think that the expansion of the AEDM is part of the cause.”

Greer also explained other problems with AEDM program. AEDM teachers have “twice the workload for curriculum preparation” because they must prepare, collect, and grade instructional packets for 54 students. Add to this work logs, and disciplinary records for students that haven’t completed their work and teachers are stuck with hours and hours of paperwork that “takes away from direct teaching.”

While AEDM might be a relatively quick way to increase the numbers of inmate students receiving education programming it should be used as a supplement to the department’s core education programs, not a substitute.

Solutions

3. Enlist the Expertise of Library Workers to Increase Rehabilitation Effectiveness

One way to increase rehabilitation programming is to recognize professional librarians in CDCR as a rehabilitative class under AB900 and grant them pay parity with academic teachers and vocational instructors. This would enable the department to recruit and retain the number of librarians needed to expand educational programming in correctional libraries statewide. Many librarians are already deeply involved in rehabilitation.

“At Deuel Vocational Institution we have workshops on anger management, stress management, victim awareness, resume writing, business plan development, poetry, and a book club,” said Jinni Ciruli, Librarian at Deuel Vocational Institution. “This is all possible because we are fully staffed. In the future we hope to start a peer tutoring program with San Joaquin Public Library and a self improvement workshop.”

Patrick Moloney, Senior Librarian at California Men’s Colony in San Luis Obispo, initiated a best practices literacy program that has been modeled at CDCR facilities statewide. This could be part of a standard literacy curriculum at all CDCR libraries. The Reading Horizons curriculum has been used in CDCR facilities for years and is a successful literacy program that, according to a review in the mid-1990s raised reading scores by two grade levels. Perhaps this program could be expanded to include more inmates with the help of our library workers.⁶

Other states have been doing innovative projects as well. In 1986, the Oklahoma Department of Corrections created a literacy task force that enlisted the talents of librarians and a committee of corrections educators. They started “Oklahoma...Do You Read Me?” a literacy program that coordinates over 200 reading tutors at the department. The program increased literacy rates among inmates and went on to win the 1988 Laubach Literacy Action Award.⁷

All of California’s prison facilities could be engaging students with the kinds of programs that are already in places like Deuel. We simply need a commitment to fully utilize the expertise and experience of our CDCR Librarians and fill librarian vacancies in order to expand rehabilitation programming.

Challenges that Remain

• Overcrowding Leaves Little Room for Education

A 2007 report on CDCR rehabilitation authored by several corrections experts found that severe prison overcrowding meant that space designed for education was used to house inmates, which in turn had a negative effect on the quality of instruction. The report’s first finding was that “The state of overcrowding in CDCR prison facilities makes it difficult for offenders to access rehabilitation programs...18,000 prisoners are being housed in spaces designed for programs.”⁸ To remedy the situation the panel recommended that the CDCR “reduce overcrowding in its prison facilities to make it easier for offenders to access rehabilitation programming.”⁹ Recently there has been a slight dip in inmate populations due to a combination of diversion programs, and out-of-state transfers. But CDCR is projecting that the inmate population will grow in a few years. To this date the department has not successfully implemented any long range policy fixes to the overcrowding problem.

Solutions

4. Educators Should Choose Instructional Materials

Solutions

5. Perform Better Educational Assessments of Inmates

Overcrowding came up repeatedly in our focus groups. Leona Jones, an Adult Basic Education teacher at Central California Women’s Facility talked about teachers having to share desks and instructional spaces being cramped. Bill O’Rafferty, an IT worker at Valley State talked about teachers having “closets for offices” and agreed that “space was at a premium.”

The problem of space, however, is not only about classrooms and offices being too small. Some teachers don’t even have classrooms. An instructor at Wasco State Prison explained that not having a fixed space to work in makes it hard to teach because educators don’t control the time or space where they must do their job. The Wasco State Prison focus group described teaching classes in a large room where other inmates were watching loud TV’s or taking showers. These distractions meant that only the most focused students could get any work done.

Although overcrowding is a system-wide problem, it remains unclear from our study whether other severe problems with educational space extend to all CDCR facilities. Our study did find that a persistent lack of educational space hampered the effectiveness of teaching. Further we found that teachers and inmates must have access to an enclosed, dedicated room in order to effectively communicate with one another and concentrate on learning. The state needs to find a creative way to respond to this crisis within our current budget constraints. One possible solution could be changes in scheduling educational programs to make more efficient use of what little dedicated classroom space remains. For example, the CDCR’s Substance Abuse Treatment Facility offers vocational programs seven days a week which allows two different sets of students to use the same classroom each week. This change could be implemented in many other prisons in order to make more classes available to inmates.

• **Instructional Materials are Often Inappropriate for Adults**

One of the most widespread issues hindering education is the inappropriateness of many instructional materials. Educators are often forced to try to teach adult inmates materials geared towards children. “We have to use an eighth grade textbook series to prepare students for a high school equivalency test,” said Doug Hall an Adult Basic Education/GED teacher at the Substance Abuse Treatment Facility in the Central Valley.

Teachers find it is demeaning and often counter-productive to attempt to teach reading to adults – particularly those in a prison setting – with grade school texts. Leona Jones said teachers at Central California Women’s Facility were forced to use “books designed for six and eight year olds” that were of little or no use with adults. She then told the group that more appropriate reading materials were ordered but that teachers were told by management not to use them because they had not been “approved.” John Kern, a vocational instructor from the department’s Correctional Training Facility in Soledad, talked about the how “the new literature program the Office of Correctional Education has introduced is geared toward junior high school kids at risk and includes images of youngsters that some of our teachers fear could be sexually gratifying to our pedophiles” in the prison. He called the curriculum “unrealistic” because it’s not age appropriate, and requires group instruction. “By definition our students are at various levels in various subjects and are notoriously unsuited to organized group instruction.”

Solutions

6. Reduce Time Spent on Redundant Paperwork

Folsom Prison Computer Teacher Larry Hanson fears that his inmate students are not really learning how to use real world technology in the facility's Computer Assisted Instruction program. Hanson said that simply learning how to use a keyboard and mouse is not the same as learning how to use the popular software packages common in outside businesses. His idea is to allow teachers to use the type of software packages that inmates are most likely to encounter once they are working on the outside. "These inmates need to be able to re-order parts, log in and log out from work, use a restaurant computer to find out which tables are open and what items are on the drink menu – just real basic stuff. We should be training inmates with this type of industry software."

Hanson also said the inmates with special education needs are poorly served because of the cost of transporting and securing inmates with special education needs to the facilities that offer appropriate programming.¹⁰ A decade ago the state refused to provide special education to adult prisoners with developmental disabilities as required under federal law and lobbied Congress for an exemption.¹¹ Today, beyond an initial Reception Center screening, it's unclear whether these inmates are receiving the special attention they need. In both cases we see a mismatch of instruction to the real education needs of inmates.

Solutions

7. Finish Information Technology Upgrade

Wasco Prison Bridging instructors, who help inmates with basic literacy and the development of life skills in the department's Reception Centers before they get a permanent prison assignment, said that many non-English speaking inmates in their facility often had no instructional materials prepared for them. According to an August 2008 report on the educational status of inmates at Wasco State Prison, 8 percent (223) of the 2744 students tested at the facility scored zero. This means that most likely they are non-English speaking or illiterate.¹² In a heroic effort Wasco teachers had to come together and translate instructional materials from English to Spanish on their own time.

The English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Development programs at many CDCR prisons are often backlogged leaving non-English speaking prisoners in an educational no-man's-land. For example, at the California Rehabilitation Center, a Level I and II prison facility in Riverside County, the English as a Second Language Program had a waiting list of over 120 prisoners at last count.¹³

• Prisoner Assessment Tools Lack Adequate Educational Component

Currently, the department's primary tool for assessing inmates is the Correctional Offender Management and Profiling Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS) program, which has value but lacks a focus on education and programming. Currently, the only educational assessment of an inmate at the reception centers is the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and in many cases inmates are only asked to complete the reading portion during an evaluation instead of taking the full battery of tests available. Further shortcomings are that many inmates do not take this test seriously and are not in an environment conducive for testing. The TABE reading score gives educators a possible range of literacy but little else.

The ability to effectively assess inmates entering the prison system is *the* critical first step in making sure that prisoner will have access to the proper academic and vocational instruction. "Creating buy-in with the inmate and creating a plan from the beginning gives the inmate some hope of change and educators believe it will reduce recidivism," said Cindie Fonseca, a Vocational Instructor at the California Rehabilitation Center.

• Laborious Record Keeping Reduces Teaching Time

Another complaint from teachers and vocational instructors at the facilities that we visited was that the new reporting requirements resulting from AB900 were keeping teachers and vocational instructors busy with paper work instead of doing their job – teaching inmates.

Even before the passage of the law, record-keeping and information flow was a big problem. Computers, when educators were lucky enough to have access to them, often could not communicate with other systems. Departmental silos were reinforced by electronic silos. But today with the number of reporting requirements increasing for rehabilitation staff this inability of computers to be used to communicate across programs is greatly prolonging the time educators are spending on administrative tasks.

“Reporting has become a big burden,” said Jessica Avery, a Vocational Instructor at Kern Valley Prison. “I have a six and a half hour class with 27 inmate students. One day I found myself spending five hours of that time doing paperwork.”

“One of the reports encompassed tracking detailed ‘S’ time for custody which has 16 categories and ‘S’ time for Office of Correctional Educational (OCE) which has 32 categories,” Avery continued. “This is in addition to completing report cards, monthly data sheets, tool inventory. Much of it was filling out the same information on different forms for different agencies, OCE and the Kern Valley Education Office. There are days that the paperwork and deadlines are so overwhelming, I don’t even have time to lecture.”¹⁴

In 2007, Governor Schwarzenegger’s Expert Panel on rehabilitation reform identified poor information technology systems at the CDCR as an impediment to effective programming. According to the panel “less than one-third of the facilities and employees are connected to the network.”¹⁵ This not only has implications for the ability of rehabilitation workers to track inmate progress or tailor programming to the needs and risks of each inmate, it also means that our educators spend longer periods of time filling out administrative forms. A fully integrated information system would also be helpful for Case Records Analysts and Correctional Counselors both of whom need correct data, quickly in order to do their jobs with maximum efficiency. This would be especially true for Case Records Analysts if any further inmate credit systems for successful program completion are passed by the California Legislature.

The only potential fix on the horizon is grossly underfunded. Governor Schwarzenegger included fewer than \$1 million for the implementation of the Education for Inmates Reporting and Statewide Tracking project (EdFIRST) in his 2008-09 budgets. This project according to California’s Department of Finance would allow the CDCR to track “student participation, progress, and achievement...replac[ing] the existing manual system.”¹⁶

Wasco State Prison upgraded its infrastructure for the new computer system in the summer of 2008, but as of March 2009 teachers there have yet to receive any training on the new intranet network and state database. One Wasco focus group participant stated, “having a working database to assess student information would be instrumental in helping educators tailor academic instruction to inmate needs.”

EdFIRST is not a new program. Since 2005 it has been promoted as a tool to help correctional staff to track inmate programming progress.¹⁷ Four years later rehabilitation staff members still haven’t been trained on how to use the system. One solution is to reprioritize IT training and make it an integral part of professional development for educators.

Solutions

8. Give Educators Control Over the Inmate Assignment Process

Solutions

9. Promote More Collaboration Inside CDCR

Solutions

10. Design Incentives for Inmates to Attend Classes.

• Teachers Don't Control Inmate Educational Assignments

For years, educators have been frustrated by the assignment process. Inmates are placed into educational programs by correctional lieutenants instead of educators. In fact, educators have no input into the assignment process. Many lieutenants lack the technical ability to move the inmates using the computer systems available to them. In addition, some aren't even aware of the varied educational programs that are offered.

"You have an inmate who has a fifth grade reading level who is placed into an Adult Basic Education III program which is meant for inmates with an above ninth grade reading level," said Fonseca, who is also the chair of Local 1000's educators group. "This causes disruption for the teacher and the other students. It alienates the inmate immediately because he is at a "lower" level than the other students in the Adult Basic Education III setting. Moving this inmate into the appropriate classroom can take months and there is little or no accommodation for the re-assignment."

In CDCR's Division of Juvenile Justice, educators are in charge of scheduling, ensuring that inmates are in the right programs and can move them around in various education departments as needed. While the educational needs of CDCR's Division of Adult Institutions are different, there needs to be a way to easily move inmates in or out of programs relative to their educational needs.

Local 1000 members believe that most of problems we have outlined could be improved if workers could provide feedback about rehabilitation reform on a regular, more organized basis. This would encourage the department to provide more timely and accurate information to the legislature and the public about the success and failure of rehabilitation programs in California's prisons.

Solutions

1. Develop Alternative Plan to Expand Educational Space

AB900 has not been able to solve the problem of lack of educational space. We need a Plan B that might include lengthening the school year, increasing hours of instruction or integrating vocational and academic classes.

2. Formally Recognize Inmate Successes in Cook Crews with a Certificate Program

Invest in worker generated projects and ideas like developing a certification program for Correctional Supervising Cook food service crews or restoring the culinary arts vocational program. Either of which would provide inmates with marketable skills when they leave prison.

3. Enlist the Expertise of Professional Librarians and Librarian Assistants

Librarians should be used for literacy programs for inmates, GED night classes, media labs, and other educational projects that increase the number of inmates receiving academic instruction.

4. Educators Should Choose Instructional Materials

Educators know best which materials are useful in the classroom and which materials don't work. Give them more say over the selection of evidence based curriculum and instructional tools.

5. Perform Better Educational Assessments of Inmates

While the TABE educational assessment tool is good for some evaluations, other, more comprehensive educational assessment tools should be considered by the department.

6. Reduce Time Spent on Redundant Paperwork

Have a task force review all paperwork and record-keeping duties of educators in order to end duplicative tasks and streamline administrative responsibilities.

7. Finish Information Technology Upgrade

Finish installing and training for the EdFIRST computer project to help educators save time on administrative tasks and track inmate progress in programming more accurately and efficiently.

8. Give Educators Control Over the Inmate Assignment Process

Educators and Principals agree that the education assignment process should be controlled by educators in order to match inmates with appropriate programs.

9. Promote More Collaboration Inside CDCR

Create rehabilitation working groups within prison facilities that reach out to all sections in order to promote best practices and collaborate on biggest challenges.

10. Design Incentives for Inmates to Attend Classes

Currently inmates receive hourly wages for doing things like cleaning up cell blocks. Though the rate is meager, this money allows them to purchase goods at the canteen. Creating similar incentives for education, both academic and vocational, might encourage inmates to obtain the skills they will need when they leave prison.

Endnotes

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<http://www.restaurant.org/pdfs/research/state/california.pdf>
- 2 From Cellblocks to Classrooms: Reforming Inmate Education to Improve Public Safety, *California Legislative Analyst's Office*. February 2008 P. 13, 14
- 3 Prison Reform: Achieving Results, *California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation*. April 2008, P.8 http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/News/docs/AB900_Achievements_040908.pdf
- 4 From Cellblocks to Classrooms: Reforming Inmate Education to Improve Public Safety, P. 7, 8
- 5 For more information about the weaknesses of distance learning read the following webpage — Is Distance Learning For You? Learn-Source.Com, 2009 http://www.learn-source.com/schools/distance_learning.html. It identifies drawbacks including lack of a classroom setting, no structured learning opportunities, less interaction with other students and increased time to get feedback on your work.
- 6 HEC Reading Horizons, California Department of Corrections Project. 1998
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- 7 Report on Correctional Education for a Satellite Based Corrections Training Network, The Education Coalition, 2007
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- 8 A Roadmap for Effective Offender Programming in California, *California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation*. June 2007. P. viii, 2
- 9 Ibid. P. viii
- 10 While the cost of transporting inmates is not the only roadblock to providing special education inmates the instruction they need, making sure that prisoners can move to facilities that are the most appropriate for them is an important first step.
- 11 No Special Education For Prison Inmates, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Press Release, June 1997. http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/News/1997_Press_Releases/press1997-14.html
- 12 School Community Profile, Wasco State Prison. August 12, 2008, P.5
- 13 Sterngold, James, Illiteracy Reinforces Prisoners Captivity. San Francisco Chronicle December 2006.
- 14 “X” time is time inmates are present in an educational assignment and “S” time is when they are absent from that same assignment through no fault of their own, such as a lockdown or modified programs.
- 15 A Roadmap for Effective Offender Programming in California, P. 118 http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/news/docs/Expert_Rpt/ExpertPanelRpt_AppendJ.pdf
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- 17 Know Grow Go: Office of Correctional Education Master Plan, *California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation* July 2005, P. 23 <http://www.cetac.org/documents/correctionaled/CaliforniaMasterPlanabridged.pdf>